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US vs IS: The role of the visual image in enlisting and renewing support for armed groups in Iraq

ABSTRACT

This article claims that the visual image contributes to, reflects and supports the dominant discourse of two powerful armed groups that have operated in Iraq: the US military and the Islamic State. The article claims that in the current postmodern climate of mass media and Internet communications, the visual image – allied to oral communication – has transcended the power of the mere spoken or written word: as a result of its emotional impact. This article explores three crucial insights into the ideological power of the visual image – the framing or interpretation of responsibilities and violence in media production, the power of the image as spectatorship based on emotion and spectacle, and the sublime or transcendental nature of the visual image – concluding that Islamic State recruitment clips and news reports best capture the concept of the sublime, drowning the audience in mystery, horror and guilt.

KEYWORDS

Islamic State
news reports
recruitment
visual image
framing
spectacle
sublime

INTRODUCTION

The conflict in Iraq has produced atrocities beyond comprehension and belief. Iraq Body Count has detailed deaths that have resulted from the violence in Iraq since the US invasion of 2003. Their current total of documented deaths is 224,000 (October 2015). This is a tragic understatement because IBC has focused on passive surveillance methods: reports from media and morgues rather than eyewitness accounts (web.mit.edu). Kentane (2013) provides a more harrowing vision of these atrocities, claiming that around 1.5 million Iraqi children under the age of 5 are undernourished and 100 small children are dying every single day. The survivors are sons or daughters to victims of torture, rape and chemical burns. Parents are traumatized; their children are subjected to abuse and neglect, suffering from sleep-related disorders, social withdrawal and depression: 'horrible images of torn dead bodies scattered in streets ... remain firm in the children's minds' (Kentane 2013). Organization of Women's Freedom in Iraq (2010) reports child rape, prostitution, girls selling organs. In 2009, gangs operating within Iraq were selling children on the international market at as little as 300 USD per head (Lavender 2012).

In the midst of all this, armed groups continue to recruit soldiers and supporters, the purpose of this article being to understand the role and collaboration of the visual image in this horrific cycle of violence. Two YouTube clips stand out: the first is a product of the US Marines, *Operation Iraq Freedom* (2015), and the second is a product of Islamic State, *Al-Ghuraba (The Chosen Few)* (2014).

There are strong differences between these two clips in their visual impact and discourse of power (Phillips 2016). *Operation Iraq Freedom* targets recruits to the US Marines. This YouTube clip proudly displays the supremacy of US technologies, manufactured products and weapons of mass destruction. It celebrates the commitment of courageous US Marines, young men 'endowed by their Creator with unalienable rights: liberty and the pursuit of happiness'. This psychopathic 'pursuit of happiness' is reflected in images of US warplanes in full flight and in precise formation skimming across perfect blue skies; maps and deserts and missions; silhouettes of our heroes marching across sunrises and sunsets; the troops coming home to hugs, kisses, tears, smiles and spotless US flags. There is not a corpse in sight.

In sharp contrast, the IS recruitment clip *Al-Ghuraba (The Chosen Few)* portrays the life of Abu Muslim, a young Canadian man explaining why he joined this fundamentalist group: that in order to be true to his Islamic beliefs he could no longer live in the land and light of unbelievers. Images contrast the beautiful forests and lakes and cities of Canada and the barren terrain and grim battle at the Syrian airport where he sacrificed his life. In contrast to the US Marines recruitment clip, the IS clip presents a dead corpse, the sad one of Abu Muslim, and there is beautiful music too: a melodious chant that refers to forgiven sins, spilt blood, perfumed flowers and the hope of resurrection.

The purpose of this article is to compare and contrast the use of the visual image – allied to oral communication – on the part of the United States and IS as a method of enlisting and renewing support for these armed groups in spite of or rather because of the atrocities that these groups perpetrate. This article suggests that the identities and values and interests of these armed groups are constructed out of the discourse of these atrocities, and that the visual image plays a crucial role in recruiting and renewing support from the public by defending or rather promoting gross abuses of human rights.

The three US clips comprise the US Marine recruitment clip *Operation Iraq Freedom*, an NBC report on the Iraq war (2003) also called 'Operation Iraq Freedom', and a CNN report entitled 'War Stories from the Front' (2003/2004). The three IS YouTube clips include the IS recruitment clip *Al-Ghuraba (The Chosen Few)* (2015), an IS report on erasing the border between Iraq and Syria, *End of Sykes-Picot* (2014), and one IS execution clip, *Revenge of the Monotheists* (2015).

These six clips – three of US origin and three attributed to the IS – have been selected because of their strong ties to the atrocities in Iraq that these two armed groups have committed. These clips provide insight into US and IS interests in Iraq, into their notions of Iraq nationhood, into the extreme violence that both United States and IS use to implement these interests, and into the discourse that the United States and IS have produced in order to legitimize these atrocities.

Bove (in Bove et al. 2015) argues that the violence of the United States and IS towards the Iraq people has its roots in their interest in oil. He claims that foreign intervention is 100 times more probable if oil reserves are present in a society that is experiencing civil war (2015), suggesting that

before the ISIS forces approached the oil-rich Kurdish north of Iraq, ISIS was barely mentioned in the news...but once ISIS got near oil fields, the siege of Kobani in Syria became a headline and the U.S. sent drones to strike ISIS targets.

(Bawden 2015)

Werner (2016) asserts that US political, economic and military predominance in the twentieth century has been based on oil monopolies, but that oil 'has now proved to be the Achilles heel of [US] strategic interests' because 'oil is quite literally fueling our newest enemy, the Islamic State (ISIS), in its expansion into Iraq and control of small oilrigs'. He argues that news reports in CNN that claimed that IS earned three million dollars per day from oil have influenced US policy and discourse towards the Islamic State, turning its blind indifference into bloody war.

This analysis of recruitment clips and news reports attributed to US vs IS provides additional insight into the media construction and destruction of Iraq nationhood and national identity. IS does not respect the national borders of Iraq as the IS clip on the obliteration of the border between Iraq and Syria (Jihadology 2014b) implies. Bunzel (2015) suggests that the destruction of Iraq nationhood and national identity is rooted in IS discourse, in the act of al-Qaeda in Iraq changing its name in October 2006 to the Islamic State of Iraq. He recalls that in June 2014 the Islamic State 'swept into western Iraq nearly unimpeded, conquering most of the country's Sunni territories, including the city of Mosul'. Their spiritual leader then named the group 'the Islamic State' rather than 'the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham [Syria]' because 'its sovereignty was to extend across the entire world, not just Iraq and Syria' (Bunzel 2015: 31).

These six clips therefore provide understanding of the discourse that has recruited and renewed and mobilized US and IS support against the people of Iraq. *Newsweek* (Anon. 2016b) reports that the United States is currently leading an international campaign of air strikes against Islamic State in both Syria and Iraq and that Russia's intervention in September 2016 'turned the tide of Syria's five-year conflict' as 'Russian jets and helicopters carried out dozens of strikes daily' against the IS-held city of Palmyra'. The *Chicago Tribune*

(Anon. 2016a) suggests that two cities – Raqqa in Syria and Fallujah in Iraq – play a key role in ‘eroding the Islamic State’s dreams of a Middle East caliphate’, although ‘civilian tolls are likely to be devastatingly high, and after all the fighting is done, there may not be much left standing in either city’.

The issue of the authorship of the IS clips only adds to their interest. Mainstream US media organizations such as *The Washington Post* suggest that IS hires cameramen such as the Moroccan, Abu Hajer al-Maghribi ‘to film prayers at a mosque...or militants exchanging fire’ and that ‘inevitably, a slip would come with the coordinates to an unfolding bloodbath’ (20 March 2016). This newspaper article claims that media professionals are playing a key role in staging these rituals of Death, and that in one clip, ‘the hooded executioner raised and lowered his sword repeatedly so that crews could catch the blade from multiple angles’. *The Washington Post* concludes that the Islamic State’s ‘relentless’ media campaign has ‘fueled a global migration of militants’ and that as a result ‘more than 30,000 foreign fighters from more than 115 countries have flooded into Syria since the start of that country’s civil war’. By contrast, Nimmo (2015) argues that the US military and its intelligence apparatus might produce part of the propaganda material attributed to IS ‘considering the past history of the intelligence community, particularly in its documented effort to create terrorist groups and, domestically, contrive terror plots for propaganda value’.

The purpose of this article is to assess the claim that visual images play a central role in political communication, that much of modern life takes place on-screen and through the medium of the visual image, that this proliferation of visual images has made film and television entertainment the United States’ second largest export after aerospace (Barber 1995: 90), and the claim that visual images have sensual immediacy: ‘an undeniable impact on first sight that a written text cannot replicate’ (Mirzoeff 2003: 15). This article explores three crucial insights into the role of visual images – allied to oral communication – in the attribution of responsibilities and in the construction of loyalties to US vs IS: to Us vs Them (van Dijk 2005). These three insights are: (1) the framing and interpretation of responsibilities and violence in media production (Iyengar 1991); (2) the power of the image as spectatorship based on emotion and spectacle rather than on reason and logic (Huxford 2008); and (3) the sublime or transcendental nature of the visual image (Burke 1998; Lyotard 1984; Baudrillard 1983, 1995; Jameson 1991; Žižek 1989).

The concept of framing refers to the selection and packaging of images of violence in US and IS media production, such as the clean war and intelligent missiles of the United States vs the blood and gore and executions of IS. The notion of the image as spectatorship (emotion and spectacle) shifts the focus of the audience from informational content to affective impact of images (Huxford 2008), suggesting that the purpose of violent images of US bombardments is to produce support for the US regime and army rather than to inform us or encourage criticism of the atrocities. The concept of the sublime spans classical, modernist and postmodernist theories of visual representation, from the transcendent power of Nature to the conflict between reason and emotion to the presentation of the unrepresentable (Lyotard 1984: 1991). This insight into the sublime nature of the image suggests that the most powerful visual images do not merely persuade, because ‘to be convinced is usually within our control’ (Longinus 1906: 4). The most effective images amaze the audience because ‘amazement is the result of an irresistible force beyond the control of

any audience'. This article suggests that the IS clips function on the level of the sublime, drowning our senses in amazement or horror.

These three crucial insights into the nature and effect of the visual image in media representations of the Iraq conflict are explored and applied in much more depth and detail throughout this article.

PREVIOUS ACADEMIC RESEARCH INTO MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF IRAQ CONFLICT

Previous academic research has focused on US government and media strategies (Kumar 2006; Patrick and Thrall 2007), on US discourse (Coe 2011; Bonn 2011), on embedded US journalists (Pfau et al. 2005), on IS media techniques (Ingram 2014), and on media images of the injured and dead in Iraq that did not reflect the human toll (Silcock et al. 2008; Zelizer 2004). Kumar (2006) highlights the current or rather continual crisis of liberal democratic principles in which the media have become the arms of conservative and corporate interests due to the concentration of ownership. Thus, instead of acting in the interests of the public, the mainstream mass media advance the interests of political and economic elites, and support the interests and efforts (and atrocities) of the government during war. Kumar argues that 'the current system of war information management derives from strategies devised by political elites and military planners [that] built upon those of the Cold War' (Kumar 2006: 50).

The political elite claimed that it was media coverage of the Vietnam conflict that led to US defeat, arguing that television distorted the war by showing graphic images of the dead, hence turning Americans against the war. Right up to 1968, media coverage of war reflected the official line, but war planners have devised systems of media control. During the US invasion of Grenada in 1983, journalists were prevented from going to Grenada. In response to protests, the National Media Pool included a small number of trusted reporters that could be transported to the scene of war at short notice. In Panama, 1989, this happened. Before the start of the Iraq war, CNN set up a system of script approval where reporters had to send their stories to monitors, so that all 175 editors of Murdoch's worldwide newspaper empire supported the war; Fox television ridiculed antiwar protesters. Flags were incorporated in broadcasts. Fox and MSNBC Iraq news programmes adopted the title, 'Operation Iraq Freedom', the Pentagon's name for the Iraq operation.

Patrick and Thrall (2007), on the other hand, have critiqued the common hegemonic interpretation of Iraq news coverage, that 'Once the bombing started, the big media rallied to the cause of war, as did much of the public, leaving even less room for dissent' (Rutherford 2004: 188). Patrick and Thrall argue instead that propaganda theory best explains the dramatic drop in public support for Bush's handling of the war in Iraq because using the media to influence the public becomes more problematic as the administration's control of information is reduced (2007). Coe (2011) similarly highlights the limited impact of President Bush's discourse on mass media production, noting that although Bush had a considerable presence in broadcast programmes, his justification of atrocities – based on the pursuit of Freedom – did not reflect the central concern of the media: our troops on the ground.

Bonn supports an 'elite-engineered' model of moral panic, claiming that negative media stereotypes of Muslims in the decades prior to 9/11 'created an important antecedent to the moral panic over Iraq' (2011: 242) and predis-

posed the US public to punitive action towards Iraq. Hence the framing of Saddam Hussein and his supporters as evil by President Bush and the news media after 9/11 interacted with negative stereotypes of all Arabs in the United States and supported the principle of retaliation. Lule (2003) concentrates on the use of metaphors to legitimize the invasion of Iraq. NBC *Nightly News* programmes on 'The Games of Saddam' – referring to Iraqi actions during the weapon inspection – were included in the timetable for war. Lakoff (1991, 2003) similarly claimed that metaphors kill, so that Saddam (i.e., Iraq) 'was bluffing the United States and the UN, as if in a poker game, gambling with his future and the future of his people' (Lule 2003: 8).

Pfau (in Pfau et al. 2005) explores the connection between embedded reporters and episodic framing of the Iraq conflict, arguing that television privileges visual content over verbal content, suggesting that episodic reports are prized because of their visual element, positing that television's episodic bias might be even more pronounced as a result of embedded news reports, and concluding that embedded television news reports were more positive at the expense of 'the big picture'.

Silcock (in Silcock et al. 2008) examined more than 2500 war images from US television news, newspapers, news magazines and online news sites at the beginning of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, observing that only 10% showed injury or death. He argues that journalists are trapped in a dilemma because the most profound image of war is death: are journalists truth tellers? Or should journalists be compassionate (Saunders 2003; Smith 2003) and respect issues of taste (Frost 2000; Matelski 1991) and the sensitivities of their audiences regarding injury and fatality? Silcock (in Silcock et al. 2008) concluded that television produced the most images of horror (around 15%); newspapers and magazines, about 9.1%; and Internet news sites only produced around 2%. But all in all, 'the portrayal of the injured and dead by the mainstream US media at the beginning of the Iraq War did not reflect the human toll in Iraq' (Silcock et al. 2008: 11). Zelizer similarly argues that 'the about-to-die moment' predominated in coverage of 9/11, and that initially, 'depictions of body parts, blood, and gore were generally nowhere to be found' (2004: 29). News executives admitted their intention to target 'other focal points, such as inanimate objects or live bodies'. This reflected media reluctance to depict death itself by focusing instead on 'the jagged holes ripped in the Twin Towers'.

Ingram provides deep insight into the nature of IS propaganda techniques, suggesting that modern insurgency thinking 'has long appreciated the importance of shaping the perceptions of contested populations' (2014: 4). He argues that IS disseminates two streams of information – official communiqués that are predominantly communicated through its media centre, Al-Hayat, and unofficial communications through its members – and claims that 'their use of simple messages, catchy phrases and striking imagery... augmented by actions in the field...shape the perceptions and polarize the support of its audiences' (2014: 4). Their official media messages have reach, relevance, resonance and timeliness, operating through a broad range of platforms: billboards, online publications and clips. Their unofficial messages are transmitted through Twitter and Facebook. Official productions range from beheading videos to Lend me your ears releases of kidnapped British journalist John Cantlie to Establishment of the Islamic State audio-visual productions in which charismatic religious leaders characterize the moderates as traitors.

Winter argues that Islamic State political communication ‘captures the imaginations of its potential recruits by offering both immediate change and the ability to transform their future in the long term’ (2015: 6). He has identified six key elements in this communication – brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging and utopianism – and claims that ‘while brutality is easily the most prominent of these narratives in the West, utopianism is by far the most important narrative for Islamic State’s propagandists’ because ‘it is the organisation’s utopian offer that is most alluring to new recruits’ (2015: 6).

Alfred (2015) concentrates on the Islamic State use of Twitter, claiming that its supporters have around 46,000 Twitter accounts, and developing a portrait of the typical ISIS Twitter user. This portrait suggests that IS supporters who use Twitter are mainly based in Iraq or Syria, and that ‘around three-quarters of the Twitter users selected Arabic as the language for their accounts, while nearly one-fifth chose English’. Alfred (2015) suggests that the choice of language ‘reflects the distribution of Western foreign fighters’, and that the use of English ‘reflects ISIS’s target audience in the United States’. IS Twitter users are extremely active – 62 per cent of supporters had tweeted in the previous 30 days; IS supporters had an average of 1004 Twitter followers – although ‘much of ISIS’s social media success can be attributed to a relatively small group of hyperactive users, numbering between 500 and 2,000 accounts, which tweet in concentrated bursts of high volume’.

ISSUES TO BE INVESTIGATED

This article is designed to contribute to these insights into US media strategies, discourse, embedded journalists and IS media techniques, but it focuses more deeply and in more detail on the role of the visual image. The article claims that the main role of news reports in general and of the visual image in particular is not to provide information or surveillance (reason and evidence) to citizens (Huxford 2008) or to act as a watchdog monitoring the activities of government and other authorities (Lasswell 1948) based on the old adage that ‘the camera does not lie’ (Zelizer 1995).

This article insists that the visual image does not support the truth of the information that is supplied through the oral text in the news report as liberal media theories might suggest (Herman 1999). Instead, the visual image reflects and constructs the regime or politics of truth in US or IS societies:

the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

(Foucault 1980: 131)

The article argues that the visual image contributes to, reflects and supports the dominant discourse of, US and IS recruitment clips and news reports, supporting these armed groups and legitimizing their violent existence. The article therefore explores three crucial elements that reflect and affect the recruitment and renewal of loyalties to US vs IS: (1) the framing or interpretation of responsibilities and violence in media production; (2) the power of the image as spectatorship based on emotion and spectacle rather than

surveillance, reason and logic (Huxford 2008); and (3) the sublime or transcendental nature of the visual image.

The next part of this article examines these three concepts in depth. In order to do this, the article focuses on six audio-visual clips, three attributed to the United States and three to the Islamic State. The article admits that supporters of the Islamic State have branched out into other social media outlets such as Twitter – where ‘a relatively small group of hyperactive users, numbering between 500 and 2,000...tweet in concentrated bursts of high volume’ (Alfred 2015) – and other social media platforms such as Flickr and Instagram and even dating sites (sites of images) in addition to blogs, thereby avoiding censorship and intervention on the part of US and European state authorities, reaching out to larger audiences, increasing interpersonal communication and altering the temporality and context of its imagery. However, in order to provide deeper insight into the nature and role of the visual image in postmodern audio-visual communication, this article has limited itself to six longer clips, but encourages other researchers to explore alternative IS social media channels.

1. Framing of responsibilities and violence

The framing of responsibilities and violence refers to the selection and packaging of violence in US and IS media production. Goffman introduced the concept of the frame in order to explain the methods that enable people to ‘locate, perceive, identify and label’ sensory information (1974: 21). Conversely Entman states that the frame in a news text is ‘the imprint of power’ that identifies ‘the actors or interests that competed to dominate the text’ (1993: 55), and argues that powerful interests use these frames to promote ‘a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation’ (1993: 53). This article incorporates both understandings of frames – admitting that frames both enable and limit perception – but arguing that US media images tend to exclude gory evidence of the casualties of violence from the frame. IS on the other hand tends to glorify violence, explosions and blood, packaging it as revenge and/or ritual, and celebrating their martyrs.

This investigation of visual images in the media representation of the Iraqi conflict reflects the claim that television production tends to be episodic rather than thematic (Iyengar 1991), episodic frames being defined as those that depict public issues ‘in terms of concrete instances’ and thematic frames as those that place ‘public issues in some more general or abstract context’ (Iyengar 1991: 14). Televised images have therefore contributed to the episodic coverage of the nature and causes of the Iraq conflict, burying the underlying roots and continuity of these atrocities and tragedies, and distracting ‘attention from societal and governmental responsibility’ (Iyengar 1991: 174).

Framing should be seen as a process, reflecting four central empirical aims: (1) to analyse the conditions that produce frames; (2) to identify frames; (3) to investigate the interaction between frames and the individual’s mind; and (4) to analyse the influence of frames on public opinion (D’Angelo 2002: 873). Framing is a dynamic process that involves communicator, text, receiver and culture (Entman 1993). The text alone does not determine the meaning because the meaning is not part of some one-sided process, which governs how all events will be signified (Hall 2011), but instead interacts with political attitudes (Iyengar 1991) and memories (Pan and Kosicki 1993).

2. Image as spectatorship

The concept of the image as spectatorship (emotion and spectacle) shifts the focus of the audience and critic away from the informational content of images to their affective impact (with the latter being capable of inhibiting the viewer's ability to remember the former): 'those emotions elicited, especially when spectatorship is drawn into the sublime, may be awe or fascination, as well as acute reactions that may traumatize' (Huxford 2008: 8).

3. The concept of the sublime

The concept of the sublime reflects insights into visual culture and effects that span millennia, transcending the modernist view of the image as scientific evidence or the Marxist view of the capitalist image as a source of ideology and false consciousness. Religious images and icons for example are based both 'on the plausible narration of sacred events' and also 'on a religious emotional reaction that such iconicity may help invoke' (Huxford 2008: 8). This emotional response to images may reach the level of the sublime. This term has its origins in the first century Greek scholar, Longinus, who characterized the sublime as an experience beyond mere persuasion, suggesting that great art does not persuade, because 'to be convinced is usually within our control whereas amazement is the result of an irresistible force beyond the control of any audience' (Longinus 1906: 4). Kant associates the experience of the sublime with Nature in its chaos, in 'its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation' (1987: 99–100). Burke similarly associates the sublime with the power of emotion, arguing that 'the primary passion evoked by the sublime is astonishment, a state in which all the soul's motions are frozen in horror and the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot reason' (1998: 41). The sublime is analogous to terror, and therefore to the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling (Burke 1998: 36).

Postmodern scholars have embraced the concept of the sublime. Lyotard presents two notions of the sublime: the nostalgic sublime of postmodernist architecture based on a montage of signs plundered from the past vs the sublime of avant-garde art that enters the realm of the 'presentation of the unrepresentable' through a continual process of experimentation (1984, 1991). Lyotard argues that the sublime exists as a conflict between art as a representation of a world outside of art and art as a representation of itself. On the other hand, Lyotard claims that the photographic image does not produce the real sublime sentiment that he characterizes 'as an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain', because the consistent form of the photograph 'continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure'. Baudrillard (1988) seems to concur, having moved towards the signifier side of things (McHoul and Grace 1993), rejecting hypotheses that permit belief in a true world (Baudrillard 1983). Baudrillard argues that the visual image has passed through four key phases: (1) reflecting a basic reality; (2) masking and perverting a basic reality; (3) concealing the absence of a basic reality; and (4) bearing no relation to any reality whatsoever: 'it is its own pure simulacrum' (1988). Here, in the phase of the simulacrum, instead of reality, we have hyperreality, where signs are more real than the things they signify. These insights produced two texts on the Iraq conflict: 'The Gulf War will not take place' and the Gulf War did not take place'. Here Baudrillard argues that 'the idea of a clean war, like that of a clean bomb or an intelligent missile...is a sure sign of madness', and claims that 'the closer we supposedly approach the real or the

truth, the further we draw away from them both, since neither one nor the other exists' (1988: 43). He concludes that 'we have neither need of nor the taste for real drama or real war', because we require 'the aphrodisiac spice of the multiplication of fakes and the hallucination of violence, for we have a hallucinogenic pleasure in all things' that results from our indifference, our irresponsibility, 'our... liberty' (1988: 75).

Other postmodernists such as Jameson and Žižek also embrace the concept of the sublime. Jameson argues that the sense of the sublime is intrinsic in the global world, suggesting that we have lost 'our capacity to act and struggle' as a result of our 'spatial as well as our social confusion' (1991: 92). Žižek (1989) is more cynical, suggesting that all successful political ideologies revolve around sublime objects such as God, the Fuhrer, the King; in the name of these 'sublime objects of ideology', people transgress moral laws by murdering strangers or sacrificing their lives.

In the next part of this article, these three insights into visual images – (1) framing of responsibilities and violence; (2) image as spectatorship; and (3) the sublime nature of the image – are applied to US and IS news and information production in order to better understand the role of visual images in recruitment and renewal of support for the US vs IS.

RESULTS

1. Framing

United States

The three clips attributed to US producers comprise the US Marine recruitment clip *Operation Iraq Freedom*, an NBC report on the Iraq war (2003) also called 'Operation Iraq Freedom', and a CNN report entitled 'War Stories from the Front' (2003/2004). This analysis of the political, economic and social context that produced these three clips provides insight into the rationale behind their production and the nature of the message that is transmitted to and interpreted differently by different types and members of audiences. It is therefore important to understand that these clips are not part of a monolithic process of transmission from producer to audience, that political and economic interests might collaborate or collide, that each clip targets different audiences, and that audience resistance to mainstream messages and unpredictable personal interpretations proliferate.

The US Marine recruitment clip, *Operation Iraq Freedom*, addresses a 17–24-year-old recruiting market of 30.8 million young men and women. The role of recruitment clips such as *Operation Iraq Freedom* is to 'expose recruits to the long standing Marine Corps Brand, our Core Values of Honor, Courage, and Commitment, and our mission to make Marines, win our nation's battles, and develop quality citizens' (US Marine Corps Recruitment). Gunther (1999) investigates the nature of NBC *Nightly News*, the producers of the second clip, 'Operation Iraq Freedom' (2003). He claims that *Nightly News* audiences are declining in unprecedented rates, that these programmes continue to collect between \$40,000 and \$50,000 per 30-second spot, and that Americans aged 65 and older are still the largest segment of *Nightly News* viewers. Gunther (1999) argues that

hard news has become an unappealing business, that reporting breaking news is expensive, and that 'ratings for hard news have slid, in part,

because of the explosion in alternative news sources'. The solution is to 'highlight in-depth stories, live interviews and news-you-can-use'.
(1999)

Hashmi (in Hashmi et al. 2012) argues that CNN, the producers of the third clip ('War Stories from the Front' 2003/2004) lost revenue at a rate of two million dollars a month in 1980, and was denied access to the White House pool in the early 1980s, but has developed into one of the largest news organizations, reaching 100 million households in US and 265 million households abroad. Hashmi (in Hashmi et al. 2012: 2) portrays the typical CNN viewer as 'a college-educated woman between the ages of 25 and 54, who tends to lean to the political left' but 'prefers her news to be neutral'. CNN viewers are primarily attracted to national issues, so CNN only includes international news stories 'if they are extremely important or sensational'.

In line with its role as a method of recruiting soldiers to the US cause, Clip 1 supports the US regime and the US military by framing the atrocities in Iraq as a crucial stage in the global War On Terrorism (US Marines 2015). This recruitment clip juxtaposes the light-coloured uniforms of the US Marine Corps and their anxious loving families back home with the official lifeless photograph of President Saddam Hussein of Iraq referred to as Saddam (Satan?) or a clip of Saddam shooting a pistol into the air to inflame his mob or Iraq soldiers in black uniform and black balaclavas pulled down to hide their identities and brandishing black rifles. Iraq is hereby represented as a terrorist threat to the United States and its creed of 'life, liberty and pursuit of happiness'. The visual embodiment of this US utopia or modernist dream is in the technological power and precision of US technologies of war: three fighter planes in perfect formation hurtling through turquoise sky. The structure of the clip reflects the US mission to erase this 'terrorist threat'. First the clip introduces the audience to the nature and purpose of the Marine Corps and their mission in Iraq through interviews with key personnel. The second stage is the briefing: officers taking their seat in a spotless office. Third is the challenge, the need to address 'a new kind of enemy' (an internal civilian one) and 'to look for the folks in civilian clothes'. Here a barefoot Iraqi man is pushed forward as a helicopter buzzes overhead. The success of the mission is discussed in the fifth stage: tears catch in the throat of the officer, his head framed between missile and tarmac, as he tells us about our 'husbands and sons' and about how 'everything they have done is noble'. The final stage is the victorious homecoming. Sailors salute their officers and stride down the gangplank; husband in camouflage gear hugging wife; father in white sailor uniform cradling white baby; flags and hugs.

In line with its mission to 'highlight in-depth stories, live interviews and news-you-can-use' (Gunther 1999), Clip 2 rallies a heroic team of embedded NBC journalists to the cause (NBC 2003). These journalists become the central characters in this compilation of news reports from NBC *Nightly News*. The role and heroism of both soldiers and journalists is embedded in the structure of the clip. Chapter 1 presents the military preparation for war. Chapter 2 is the ultimatum of President Bush that supposedly justifies the bombardment: 'Saddam and his sons have 48 hours' to leave Baghdad. Marines on the border are interested in the same NBC news report; it is their call to action. Chapters 3 and 4 are the beginning of the war, the advance of troops and the bombing of Baghdad. Chapter 5 refers to the 'unexpected resistance' of 'Saddam's martyrs' that have undergone 'terrorist training'. Chapter 6 focuses

on 'Life as an embed': the dangers and squalor that journalists and soldiers allegedly share. The next two chapters cut to the families back home, ignoring the plea of one mother to stop coverage ('It's heartbreaking. Every tank, every helicopter, is that my son?'), and the horror of a father seeing the trembling pale face of his tortured daughter:

Reporter: This is a happy ending, sir, your daughter has been pulled out alive.

Tearful aged dubious father: Thank you, sir.

Both Clip 2 (NBC 2003) and Clip 3 (CNN 2003/2004) celebrate the contribution of embedded journalists in constructing the narrative of US heroes. Chapter 11 of the NBC clip is dedicated to one NBC presenter, David Bloom, and mourns him as a victim of war even though he died of a pulmonary embolism. The CNN clip similarly pits embedded journalists and 'people gratified to see the end of the hated, loathed tyranny' against Saddam and his 'fifth-rate Iraqi army'. Here the role of the embedded cameramen and photographers is to legitimize the logic of the Marines – Philosophies of Life such as 'Marines have a saying about taking a city: be polite, be professional, and be prepared to kill everyone you meet' – atrocities committed. In one horrifying scene, the father, mother, uncle, two little boys and one little girl are emptied out their house and sobbing with dread and Fear of Death as the Marines stand over them with submachine guns. The embedded journalist explains that 'there are embedded in that population people trying to murder them [the Marines]'. CNN is so embedded in the moral mire of war that the Marines themselves accuse the journalists of violating human rights: 'I don't like you taking pictures of dying people...Why are you such a ghoul?'

Here the conflict between political and economic interests manifests itself. The Marines would rather conceal the evidence of their atrocities; on the other hand the media conglomerate displays the objects of its voyeuristic gaze and glorifies them because this is a source of profits. In any case, both attitudes – total denial of Death and massacres or glorification of atrocities – has the same results. The recruitment of Marines is booming: 'Fiscal Year 2014 was another productive year for MCRC Marines as their sustained recruiting efforts resulted in 31,510 total force non-prior service enlisted, 1,360 commissioned officers, 273 warrant officers, and 3,576 prior service Marine accessions of high quality' (Marine Corps Recruitment).

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The three YouTube clips attributed to IS producers include the IS recruitment clip *Al-Ghuraba (The Chosen Few)* (2014), an IS report on erasing the border between Iraq and Syria, *End of Sykes-Picot* (2014), and one IS execution clip, *Revenge of the Monotheists* (2015). The producers of these IS clips 'are not just seeking to attract new supporters and intimidate enemies', but are also aiming to 'polarise international publics, sustain their organisation's global relevance' and 'present their enlisters with evidence to convince potential recruits to become active members' (Winter 2015). Mezzofiore (2014) claims that Islamic State has recruited up to 6000 fighters in Iraq and 3000–5000 in Syria, including some 3000 foreigners, 'perhaps 500 or more from France, Britain and elsewhere in Europe', and suggests that the target audience of

IS-produced clips is young. Large numbers of foreign recruits are converts to Islam who 'commonly express their motivation as a religious obligation to protect fellow Muslims'. Production of IS propaganda material is often outsourced to disseminators who 'have no official position in the organisation, virtual or otherwise' and 'receive no reward for their activism other than gratification from within the Islamic State echo chamber' (Winter 2015).

In line with this commitment to Islamic ideals, Clip 4 frames the United States as an unacceptable threat to Muslim beliefs and believers. This clip contrasts the religious faith and commitment of Abu Muslim (Father of a Muslim), a central character and recruit to both Islam and IS, with the sinfulness, ruthlessness and indifference of unbelievers, as encapsulated in a clip of a US soldier smoking a cigar in a helicopter. The structure of the clip presents the Life, Faith and Death of Abu Muslim in chronological order: the introduction to this Canadian recruit, his comfortable life in Canada as a janitor, his decision to move from 'the light of the unbelievers' to 'the light of Islam', his challenge to storm a military airport, running towards the enemy and towards Allah, his death and his martyrdom. The anchor in Clip 5 (*End of Sykes-Picot*) is a foreigner too. His name is Abu Safiyaa; he is from Chile; and he has an automatic rifle strapped to his back. This clip similarly frames the United States and the rest as 'nations of unbelievers' who 'lost in Iraq and Afghanistan and by the will of Allah will lose in Syria'. *End of Sykes-Picot* is in the form of a tour of the remnants of the border that has been absorbed into the Islamic State. First our foreign guide and anchor flies the IS flag as a symbol of its power. He crosses the old border, sneering at the dislodged Iraqi signpost, at the abandoned border posts, at the border control vehicles that have been wrecked and at the Shiite and Yasidi prisoners that 'worship the Devil' and are only 'some of the hundreds of prisoners that we have'. He refers to the ease with which the other vehicles have been acquired from the United States and points to the IS explosive experts blowing up the Iraqi police station – because 'there is no place in the world that those buildings are safe from the Mujahidin'.

However, it is Clip 6 (*Revenge of the Monotheists*) that provides the most polarized division between 'us' and 'them': the executioners are wearing black combat uniforms and black balaclavas and only their eyes are visible; the condemned have been assigned blue prison uniforms and white blindfolds. The structure of the clip and the ritual reflects and operationalizes the power of IS over the unbeliever. In the background is only grey desert and blue sky: there is no hope of rescue in sight; there is only the audience, either silently supporting the cause or helplessly observing the atrocity. Three prisoners identify themselves through name, date of birth and place of origin. Ten tall executioners in black uniforms; ten blindfolded prisoners in blue uniforms led to the place of execution, blindfolded, hands tied behind their backs. There are wide shots and cuts to marching legs and guns. Ten executioners tower over ten prisoners seated in the sand. The seventh executioner in the line makes the speech. Camera pans from face to face: little emotion; bullets fired into backs of heads; heads on bloodied sand.

2. Image as spectatorship

United States

The three clips attributed to US producers (US Marines 2015; NBC 2013; CNN 2013/2014) capture the attention of their audiences by presenting the US military as invincible. Clip 1 (US Marines 2015) appeals to the admiration

of the spectator through the spectacle of the US Marine Corps: the state-of-the-art military technology and efficiency, the neatness, order and hygiene of the military installations, the discipline of the men, the spotlessness of the US flag/logo, the fighter planes, helicopters, warships, missiles, tanks gliding across sand, night vision goggles, and propaganda bombs. This clip not only promotes recruitment to the mean Marine machine but also advertises the US military-industrial complex, the centre of global technological production, global sales and global capitalism. The personnel interviewed in the clip support this visual message of supreme technical power and skill. There is a side shot of the face of an officer of the Marines gazing purposefully and confidently into the future as he delivers a message as neat and precise as one of his missiles: 'projecting military power from the sea ashore. That is what we are about'.

Clip 2 (NBC 2003) and Clip 3 (CNN 2003/2004), by contrast, capture their audiences by juxtaposing the invincibility of the US military and the inevitability of casualties on both sides. Soldiers and embedded journalists collaborate and co-star in the role of heroes: an embed crawls through the sand towards a soldier training his rifle on a distant target in order to ask him what he is looking at. The equipment of the journalists is based on the communication technologies that the US military itself has developed: satellite phones, videophones, the satellites themselves. The journalists in turn advertise US-based products and organizational strategies and skills – the 'carefully choreographed airstrikes', the power of the US bombardment of Baghdad in which 'at least 10 major buildings go...up in smoke in about two minutes', the 'bombs designed only to kill their targets, not innocent civilians' – and most of all 'the ringside view': the relief and joys of being a spectator.

IS

The three clips attributed to IS producers – *Al-Ghuraba*, *End of Sykes-Picot*, *Revenge of the Monotheists* – are similarly designed to impress their spectators but in a smaller arena. Clip 4 (*Al-Ghuraba*) celebrates the Faith, commitment and courage of Abu Muslim, giving up the sensual pleasures and comfort of Canada, the mountains and lakes, skiing and hunting in order to be a better Muslim and in order to contribute to the Islamic State. This clip portrays Islamic State recruits storming the airport of Minnigh. Abu Muslim has only a rifle but impresses us with his courage, meeting his Fate and, or by, uniting with Allah: 'rushing into the airport to 'meet his Lord'. Clip 5 (*End of Sykes-Picot*) provides the spectator with a view of the power of the Islamic State obliterating borders, imprisoning border guards, and commandeering border control vehicles. The speakers are triumphant and defiant: 'this is not the first border we will break. We are coming for you'. One asks this question of Obama: 'did you prepare enough diapers for your soldiers?' Clip 6 (*Revenge of the Monotheists*) has a more chilling effect on the audience, making him or her glad to be the spectator as he or she observes the power of the uniform and the gun over powerless prisoners. Hands are quite literally tied.

3. The Sublime

United States

The three clips attributed to US producers (US Marines 2015; NBC 2013; CNN 2013/2014) seldom reflect the principle of the sublime, neither causing 'the mind [to be] so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot reason' (Burke

1998), nor representing the visual illusion of the postmodern simulacrum (Baudrillard 1983, 1995), nor the presentation of the unrepresentable (Lyotard 1984), nor the unfathomable nature of our global virtual existence (Jameson 1991), nor the sublime object of ideology in the name of which we transgress moral laws (Žižek 1989).

These three clips merely produce and reproduce the dominant discourse of the US government, the US military and the US mass media conglomerates: the fact that there is a War On Terrorism and that the United States must do everything in its power to stop it. The US clips combine three dominant modern discourses: professionalism, nationalism and the family. Clip 1 reassures its audiences that the Marines 'have the tools...the training...[and] the timing' – praises their 'heart, patriotism [and] pride in their country' – and attributes all responsibility and atrocity to the enemy because 'the only way we can get it peaceful is if we fight'. The Marines are killing in order to protect their job, their family and their country, their main question being 'do we love our families enough to stay here to get the job done', their main goal being 'paying my dues just to be an American, to enjoy the freedoms that we have'. The closing sequence has a father sitting up sprightly in his hospital bed to reassure us that 'I did it for my son'. The Marines are eternally optimistic: 'hopefully in the next few years we will see exactly how it paid off'.

The main difference between Clip 1 and the other two clips is the invincibility of the Marines: there are hardly any wounded or dead bodies. Clip 2 (NBC 2003) and Clip 3 (CNN 2003/2004) are much more circumspect, understanding the realities of war, audience ratings, and advertising revenues. Clip 2 has the pale face and exposed breast of a 3-year-old Iraqi girl. She is dying. The NBC message is: 'they couldn't do anything for that little girl', rather than 'how could we do this to that little girl?' One CNN cameraman filmed 'many, many dead Iraqis particularly on the side of the road'. His solution? 'Never look them in the face; the camera in your mind will keep it with you for life'.

IS

The three clips attributed to IS producers – *Al-Ghuraba*, *End of Sykes-Picot*, *Revenge of the Monotheists* – on the other hand, are much more compelling, much closer to the sublime in which 'the mind is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot reason' (Burke 1998). The IS recruitment clip for example presents the unfathomable case of Abu Muslim, the question being why he chose to sacrifice himself for his Faith. He assures us that Islamic State supplied his material and emotional needs: a place to live, a job, a wife, a child. But he had that in Canada too: in Canada he lived like a regular person, and 'Mujahidin are regular people too: we get married; we have families; we are just like soldiers in any other army; we have lives outside our jobs'. The unique and sublime element in this clip is his martyrdom. The US clips focus on killing or at least on the potential to kill. The IS clips on the other hand focus on dying, on divine justice. The narrator declares that he rushes 'into the airport hoping to meet his Lord'. The music and the song promises him eternal life, 'If his intentions are pure, if his sins are forgiven; if the blood drips; if the flower gives perfume'. Clip 4 (*Al-Ghuraba*) takes us on a journey that leads us to Abu Muslim's corpse: at that moment we are consumed with a sense of the sublime, of overpowering emotion, and mystery.

Clips 5 (*End of Sykes-Picot*) and 6 have the same sublime sense of doom and mystery. The speakers at the border crossing (Clip 5) understand that their days are numbered, but 'we are not here to fight for earth or dirt...we are fighting to make the world of Allah the highest'. Clip 6 (*Revenge of the Monotheists*) confronts us with a transcendental notion of divine justice and with the horror and powerlessness and guilt of the condemned and damned.

CONCLUSION

This article has investigated the claim that the visual image – allied to oral communication – contributes to, reflects and supports the dominant discourse of two powerful armed groups that have operated in Iraq: the US military and the Islamic State. It has concentrated on online audio-visual communication, admitting that these two armed groups also communicate through a broad range of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, where the written word predominates, but suggesting that visual communication has sensual immediacy and emotional effect, 'an undeniable impact on first sight that a written text cannot replicate' (Mirzoeff 2003: 15). This analysis of the power of images in US and IS political communication has highlighted the interplay between visual and oral text that is key to the legitimization of the US military and the Islamic State.

The six audio-visual clips – three of US origin and three attributed to the IS – were selected because of their strong ties to the atrocities in Iraq that the United States and IS have committed. These clips provided insight into US and IS interests in Iraq, into their notions of Iraq nationhood and into the discourse that the United States and IS have produced in order to legitimize these atrocities.

This article has been based on the premise that the main role of audio-visual news reports in general and of these six audio-visual clips in particular is not to act as a watchdog monitoring the activities of government (Lasswell 1948) based on the principle that 'the camera does not lie' (Zelizer 1995: 8). Instead this article has explored three alternative insights into the nature and power of visual communication; the framing of responsibilities and atrocities, the power of the image as spectatorship, and the sublime or transcendental nature of the visual image.

The article concludes that the three audio-visual clips attributed to the United States and three attributed to IS both demonize the Other either as 'terrorists' (on the part of US political communication) or as 'unbelievers' (on the part of IS political communication). Both the US and IS frame violence as the solution rather than the source of the problems in Iraq. The recruitment clip attributed to the US Marines contrasts the light-coloured uniforms of the US Marines and their anxious loving families back home with official lifeless images of the Dictator Saddam Hussein of Iraq; the solution is a clean, modern, technological utopia based on the technologies of war. The structure of the three clips attributed to the US reflects their mission to erase this 'terrorist threat'. The three clips attributed to the IS similarly polarize 'us' and 'them', the young Canadian convert that sacrifices his life in the pursuit of the Islamic utopia vs the young US helicopter pilot puffing nonchalantly on a cigar (*Al-Ghuraba [The Chosen Few]*), the Chilean recruit vs the Shiite and Yasidi prisoners who 'worship the Devil' (*End of Sykes-Picot*) or the executioners wearing black combat uniforms and black balaclavas condemning

the blindfolded prisoners in their blue prison uniforms to death (*Revenge of the Monotheists*). Both sets of clips – United States and IS – have the same mission: to persuade both sets of recruits that killing for the cause is good. The subsequent ongoing carnage in Iraq bears tragic witness to the success of this mission.

However, it is on the level of the spectacle and the sublime that the clips attributed to the United States and those attributed to the IS differ most, bearing in mind that these clips are not part of a monolithic process of transmission, that political and economic interests might conflict, that each clip targets different audiences, and that audience reactions and resistance are unpredictable. The clips attributed to the US appeal to the admiration of the spectator through the spectacle of the US Marine Corps: the state-of-the-art military technology, the neatness, order and hygiene of the US military machine. Clips 2 and 3 (NBC 2013; CNN 2013/2014), on the other hand, address a different type of audience – one that prefers ‘in-depth stories’ (Gunther 1999) – and suggests that death and casualties are inevitable but justifiable. Here we can see the conflict between government interests that present the US as eternal and invincible and the interests of media conglomerates that profit from war, danger and Death.

To sum up, these three sanitized US reports on the Iraq conflict do suggest – as Baudrillard claimed – that the Iraq War neither took place nor will take place: that this is ‘the aphrodisiac spice of the multiplication of fakes and the hallucination of violence’ and the ultimate sign of ‘our indifference, our irresponsibility, our... liberty’ (1988: 75).

On the other hand, the three IS clips – the recruitment clip *Al-Ghuraba*, *End of Sykes-Picot*, and the execution clip *Revenge of the Monotheists* – have the opposite effect, drowning the audience in mystery, horror and guilt. The visual images and the music of martyrdom in the IS recruitment clip *Al-Ghuraba* provide both context and poignancy, telling the sad story of Abu Muslim – the wide shots of beautiful Canadian landscapes culminating in dust and death, the middle shots of his head and waist, the medium close-ups of his face and corpse. Should I be looking at this? This unaccustomed intimacy – this violation of privacy – brings a sense of voyeurism and shame. *The End of Sykes-Picot* introduces us to a Chilean recruit or CIA plant. He takes the audience on a tour of the border between Iraq and Syria that is no longer a border: expensive vehicles have been abandoned; police stations are being blown up; the border guards and other stray Satanists are rotting in a prison – ‘idiots’, he calls them. There is an air of confidence about him: he promises us that we are next. There is the sharp clean whistle of a sword being unsheathed in the background.

But it is the execution clip *Revenge of the Monotheists* that catches our attention and brings the audience to our experience of the sublime. The black uniforms of the tall guards and the blue uniforms of the prisoners are silhouetted against a perfect light blue sky. Here is a ritual execution: ten executioners; ten bound kneeling prisoners.

There is a close-up of the faces of the prisoners before there is Fade Out and Fade In, revealing their bloodstained heads in the dust. But why are there no tears, no lips moving in prayer or grief?

The audience remains trapped between reason and emotion, disbelief and belief. This is the experience of the sublime; it is a combination of mystery, horror and guilt.

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